

Animal Research – a Special Responsibility

The Max Planck Society's Senate adopted a declaration of principle (White Paper) on the topic of the use of animals in experiments for basic research in November 2016. This was preceded by comprehensive consultations on the part of an international committee convened by the President. The committee included renowned researchers from various fields of the life sciences, behavioural researchers, ethicists, communications specialists as well as senior figures from the area of research policy. The committee was chaired by Prof. Wolf Singer, a longstanding Director at the Max Planck Institute for Brain Research in Frankfurt

In its White Paper „Animal Research in the Max Planck Society“, the Max Planck Society emphasises that biological and medical research is still reliant on animal research in order to study the complicated interplay of the components of complex organisms. Interconnected systems such as the immune system and brain, for example, cannot be understood by studying only their individual parts, reduced models, or the outcome of computer simulations. The Max Planck Society, however, also highlights the ethical conflicts that arise from experiments involving animals. The gain in insight expected from an experiment must be weighed up against the potential harm inflicted on the animals. Depending on their personal value systems or cultural backgrounds, people can reach different conclusions here – there are no universally accepted standards for this evaluation. For this reason, societies must continuously renegotiate their approach to this ethical dilemma.

A research organization like the Max Planck Society faces particular challenges here, as basic research is not founded on short-term considerations about utility, but rather on the expected knowledge gain. Even if it lacks a direct practi-

cal application, this knowledge has an intrinsic value. The challenges facing humanity today can only be successfully tackled if we are aware of the consequences of our actions: we are forced to act, constantly intervening in our environment in the process. If we do not simultaneously research the possible consequences of our activities, we are acting irresponsibly. Who can possibly say whether an immune system protein discovered today will become the key to the treatment of an infectious disease in 20 years time?

INTRODUCING A FOURTH “R” FOR RESPONSIBILITY

In its White Paper, the Max Planck Society adopted a series of measures designed to achieve the best possible compromise between the potential harm caused to animals used in research, and the epistemic value of experiments. These measures include:

- the strengthening of the culture of care for the animals; this is to be achieved through the improved coordination of animal welfare within the MPG while simultaneously maintaining the highest quality in terms of scientific work;
- the further improvement and minimization of animal research – scientific insights should be used to reduce the number of experiments and the stress involved for the animals;
- the transparent communication of animal research to the general public;
- the researching of possibilities for improving the implementation of the 3 R principle;
- the researching of the living conditions of experimental animals, their social behaviour, perception of pain, consciousness and right to life;
- the provision of training in animal ethics for all MPG employees who work with animals.

In addition to this, the Max Planck Society is adding a fourth “R” for responsibility to the 3 R principle (Replacement, Reduction, Refinement), which is being applied for the protection of animals in research. This includes, among other things, the constant reassessment of harm and stress in animal research based on the very latest scientific information about the sensitivity, consciousness, and intelligence of different animal species. Approaches that may be acceptable today based on currently available knowledge could be assessed differently in a matter of just a few years. Hence the Max Planck Society’s expertise should be used to study questions such as the perception of pain and the right to life of animals and to improve the ethical discourse with the public.

Link to the White Paper:

www.mpg.de/10882259/MPG_Whitepaper.pdf

A public panel discussion entitled “Was bedeutet Tierethik in der Grundlagenforschung?” (“What does animal ethics mean in the context of basic research?”) was held in January 2017 with a view to attempting to position the MPG’s new White Paper in the current legal and ethical discourse. In addition to Prof. Wolf Singer, the panel included Prof. Dieter Birnbacher, a philosopher from Heinrich-Heine-Universität in Düsseldorf, and legal expert Prof. Anne Peters, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law in Heidelberg.

Link to the panel discussion (in German):

www.youtube.com/watch?v=oejp0z_jd64

Since January 2017, comprehensive information, including current data on animal research in the Max Planck Society, has been provided on the MPG’s website. The Animal Stud-

ies Portal was developed in the process of the examination of the topic of animal research, and new film material and images were added. The Max Planck Society is also involved in the information initiative “Tierversuche verstehen” (Understanding Animal Research) organized by the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany. The information platform for the initiative has been online since September 2016.

Link to the Animal Studies Portal:

<https://www.mpg.de/animal-studies-in-basic-research>

Link to the Alliance’s animal research information initiative (in German):

www.tierversuche-verstehen.de